

LEARNING UNDER FIRE: Training an Army While at War

A Monograph
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Infantry



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ABSTRACT

LEARNING UNDER FIRE: TRAINING AN ARMY WHILE AT WAR by MAJ
Edward G. Gibbons, Jr., USA, 57 pages.

This monograph examines the abilities of armies to train themselves while actually fighting a war. Modern doctrine as expressed in FM 100-5 and TRADOC PAM 525-5 tacitly assumes that the U.S. Army's peacetime training is adequate for any conflict that might arise. In making this assumption, doctrine ignores several lessons from history, in which armies have had to modify their training to suit the needs of battlefields on which they were actively engaged.

In its analysis of the topic, the monograph begins by defining the two forms of adaptation during conflict, reform and innovation, as expressed by Professor Stephen P. Rosen in his book Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military. This analysis establishes the theoretical background for the conduct of two case studies used to illustrate adaptive behavior of military organizations while at war. The first is the German Army's successful effort at reform following the Polish Campaign in 1939 as it readied itself for the invasion of the West. The second case study reflects an unsuccessful attempt at innovation as illustrated by the U.S. Army in Vietnam. In both examples, each army's training programs are assessed to discern how their training programs contributed to their ultimate success.

In the final analysis, the monograph draws conclusions from the case studies relevant to current U.S. training doctrine to determine its utility in preparing the Army to train under fire. It ends with several recommendations to improve both doctrine and force structure to ensure that if the Army is not prepared for the next war, it will be able to get it right faster than its opponent.

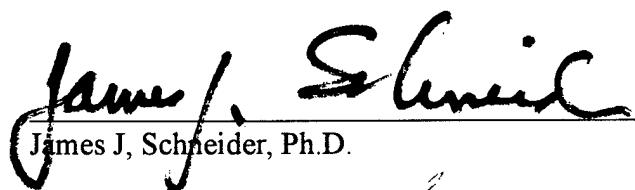
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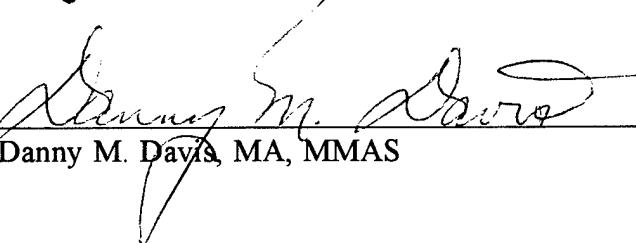
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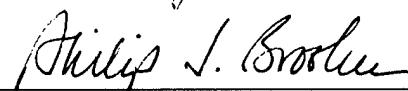
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In his article “Military Science in an Age of Peace,” Sir Michael Howard explains the difficulty faced by modern military organizations in developing a successful doctrine to prosecute future wars. In his opinion, since armed forces lack the opportunity to routinely test these visions in battle, they are, by nature, flawed to a greater or lesser extent. In no uncertain terms, he states:

I am tempted indeed to declare dogmatically that whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on now, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What does matter is their capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives.¹

Thus, what matters for Howard is not so much the rectitude of an army’s doctrine, but its ability to adapt that doctrine to the medium of combat. By definition, this extends to the training that an army receives in that doctrine as well.

This same ability to adapt is explored by theorist Stephen P. Rosen in his book Winning the Next War. In this work, he concludes that two forms of adjustment occur during wartime, *reform* and *innovation*. According to Rosen, *reform* during wartime is the product of “a failure as a result of an inability to perform tasks that have been well defined and that continue to be accepted as legitimate by the organization.”² *Innovation*, on the other hand, is a much more difficult process, since it requires the organization to recognize that its previously well-defined missions and norms are no longer valid in the context of the current conflict. According to Rosen, innovation is thus required “because an inappropriate strategic goal is being pursued, or because the relationship between

military operations and that goal has been misunderstood.”³ No matter how hard it tries, the organization fails to learn until it can change its current measure of effectiveness.

The U.S. Army’s extant visions of future conflict are contained in FM 100-5, Operations, and TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5, Force XXI Operations. FM 100-5 states that “The Army must be capable of achieving decisive victory.”⁴ Included in the definition of decisive victory is the injunction to “win quickly with minimum casualties.”⁵ TRADOC Pam 525-5 carries this vision even further, primarily citing the introduction of information technologies as a means to win decisively.

Throughout the full range of military operations, under both defensive and offensive conditions, regardless of environment, future American operations will induce massive systemic shock on an enemy. These operations will be meant to force the loss or deny the enemy any opportunity to take the initiative. Full-dimensional, joint and often multi-national Force XXI Operations will systematically attack opposing force cohesion and destroy the moral will to continue the opposition.⁶

In both of these publications, the underlying assumption is that the Army’s doctrine and training will remain basically correct during wartime regardless of the circumstances, thus facilitating rapid victory under conditions set by U.S. forces. The question they fail to answer, however, is “what if we get it wrong?” The thesis of this paper is that once started, a war must be won by soldiers trained in the tactics, techniques and procedures necessary for the successful conclusion of that conflict. For the U.S. Army, not only does this mean that its forces must be competent prior to the outbreak of hostilities, but a mechanism for the training of deployed and follow-on forces must exist to allow successful innovation or reform should pre-war doctrine prove inadequate. Using Rosen’s model, the monograph therefore focuses on the preparation of those forces and

examines the infrastructure -- doctrine and resources -- necessary to train an army in the middle of an on-going conflict.

The monograph begins by exploring Rosen's theory of innovation and reform to provide an analytical model. This model is then applied to two historical case studies featuring armies that confronted change while at war. In the first instance, the process of re-training conducted by the German Army in 1939-40 is used as an illustration of an army that successfully reformed itself in combat. It is most useful in that it provides an example of an army that critically examined itself following a military triumph as opposed to a disaster. The succeeding case study features the U.S. Army's experience in Vietnam. Counterinsurgency presented the U.S. Army with an entirely new kind of war in the jungles of Southeast Asia. This examination provides an example of an army's reaction to a conflict that clearly required it to innovate, given that its conventional doctrine and training were at least partially unsuited for counterinsurgency operations.

In the next section, the monograph concludes by comparing the training methodologies of the German Army in 1939-40 and the U.S. Army in Vietnam to those currently in place in today's Army. While recognizing that the experiences of each army are different, the purpose of this analysis is to highlight previously useful training techniques and assess their continued utility to America's force-projection army of the foreseeable future. In this way, the paper attempts to provide recommendations to ensure that the link between combat, doctrine and training remains intact during wartime.

Chapter 2

The Phenomenon of Wartime Adaptation

Yet there are so many examples of military organizations that have been unable, for whatever reasons, to learn from wartime experience that we are forced to be cautious in assuming that innovation during wartime is a straightforward matter of observing what works and does not work in combat.⁷

This monograph relies on two case studies to gain insight into the processes adopted by military organizations in reacting to wartime experience. Before this is possible, however, it is necessary to both define the types of change that can occur in combat, as well as the mechanisms that make this alteration possible. This chapter establishes this analytical background and how that experience is translated into training an organization for combat. To accomplish this, it relies on the book Winning the Next War by Professor Stephen P. Rosen, a study of twentieth-century military innovation.

In the section of the book specifically addressing wartime learning, Professor Rosen begins by defining the learning environment. In the process, he outlines four areas that constitute obstacles to improvement. First, the armies themselves are “in business.” They are actively engaged in a struggle that consumes most of their leadership’s intellectual energy, forcing them to actively test previous ideas in the unforgiving medium of combat. This interactive medium is the second obstacle to progress, since armed forces now face an opponent that is actively trying to prevent them from gleaning militarily useful information. The third factor, predictably, is time. To be useful, modifications to the organization’s accepted methods must be implemented in short order or they become irrelevant to the outcome of the conflict. Finally, Professor Rosen believes that “most obviously and importantly,” the army is suffering physical battlefield losses, affecting

both the “morale and composition of the leadership.” Given these difficulties inherent in the process, his final analysis indicates that “the lessons of combat are by no means unambiguous even when viewed first hand.”⁸

All military organizations seek to compensate for this ambiguity with mechanisms designed to increase their awareness of the enemy and themselves. For Rosen, this process constitutes the answer to the question of how and to what degree innovation occurs. From his perspective, this analysis “must begin with an examination of the ways in which military organizations collect and use information.”⁹ Military intelligence and friendly operational reports are the primary means employed to monitor the current relative status of the two sides in a conflict. By supplying the friendly and enemy situations in relation to each other, an idea of “who’s winning” can be understood in gross terms. To a certain extent, these information systems do allow an army to both learn and improve its performance. However, Rosen’s contention is that these systems are effective “only in the context of established missions.”¹⁰

Rosen supports this assertion by comparing the military’s use of these means to the cybernetic model of decisionmaking.¹¹ As information about the relative enemy and friendly situations is generated, it provides the feedback that an army uses to regulate its own performance. When this feedback indicates that the system is failing to meet a previously accepted standard, adjustments are made to reach and maintain the desired end-state. Feedback, however, only allows an army to assess its performance in relation to known missions, allowing them to change their behavior along previously established lines. In his study of the combat learning process, Rosen characterizes this use of information by a military as *reform*, especially in the wake of defeat. In Rosen’s words:

When that failure is the result of an inability adequately to perform tasks that have been well defined and that continue to be accepted as legitimate by the organization, the necessary changes can be characterized as reform.¹²

Reform is, by nature, a relatively straightforward process that is nonetheless “extremely difficult in wartime” for the reasons previously mentioned.¹³ When undertaken in the aftermath of a victory, as is the case in the first case study employed by this monograph, it is an even more noteworthy accomplishment.

Having defined military reform and the mechanisms necessary to implement it, the paper now turns to wartime *innovation*, a much more difficult undertaking. By definition, a major innovation is an unprecedeted occurrence. The organization is operating in an environment of greater uncertainty due to its lack of any previous relevant experience in implementing the prescribed changes.¹⁴ While feedback improves an army’s ability to execute what it already knows, it can not provide insight or experience to help the organization learn a completely new way of warfare. Or, according to Rosen, “When better performance of an existing mission only makes the strategic situation worse . . . organizational learning and innovation become extremely difficult.”¹⁵ In effect, the organization must first learn what it does not know, and then apply this new knowledge to change the way its forces fight.

For Professor Rosen, the crux of the innovative process is found in the way in which armies gauge their relative wartime effectiveness in relation to the ends, ways and means of strategy. He acknowledges that military operations are undertaken to accomplish a strategic goal, or end, that presumably will lead to the desired outcome of the conflict. In addition to the correct selection of the desired end-state, Professor Rosen asserts that “Implicit is an understanding of how day-to-day military operations are

related to that strategic goal.”¹⁶ In other words, the intended employment of ways and means must be compared to their actual accomplishment of missions related to achieving the stated military objective. Finally, performance indicators must be derived that allow a commander to judge his organization’s success through intelligence and administrative channels. Taken together, the correct selection of the military objective, or end, the proper relationship of ways and means to that end, and the accepted performance indicators of that relationship constitute what Professor Rosen labels as an army’s *strategic measure of effectiveness.*¹⁷

Assuming that an appropriate strategic measure of effectiveness is in place at the start of a conflict, a military organization collects the information it requires to reform itself should the need arise. Innovation, on the other hand, results when an improper strategic measure of effectiveness guides organizational behavior. The army either pursues the wrong objective, or it misunderstands the relationship between its chosen ways and means and the desired end-state. As Professor Rosen observes, “The old ways of war are employed, but no matter how well, the war is not being won.”¹⁸ In this case, the only recourse is to either redefine the military objective or re-evaluate the employment of ways and means to it.

In any event, information collection and employment is again the key to the implementation of innovative solutions. Until the redefinition of the strategic measure occurs, existing information processes will not aid innovation, as these systems merely support the now dated objectives and relations. For organizational learning to transpire, the service must base its decisions on an accurate portrayal of its own situation relative to

the enemy's, and whether or not this relationship supports the attainment of its objective. Rosen defines this process as follows:

A redefinition of the strategic measure of effectiveness tells the organization what and how it should be learning from wartime experiences. Until such redefinition takes place, a wartime military organization will learn from its experiences in terms of existing measures.¹⁹

As it continues to lose, the army tries to *reform* as opposed to *innovate* due to its now irrelevant information infrastructure.

Innovation thus presents the modern military leader with a unique set of problems. As the ability to collect intelligence and other military information improves, its analysis remains more an art than a science. This difficulty is compounded when the need to innovate is present, since it forces the service to seek information it does not know it needs to look for -- and that its enemy is actively trying to obscure. Literally, the organization "does not know what it does not know," and may not understand that it needs to start looking for the unknown instead of focusing on the old intelligence requirements. The army understands that it is failing, but it continues to look in the same places and at the same operations trying to find an answer that is not present.

This chapter focused on the analytical framework of adaptation by militaries at war. It sets the stage for an examination of two case studies illustrating both forms of wartime organizational learning in the chapters to follow. Using the concept of the *strategic measure of effectiveness* developed by Professor Stephen Rosen, these examples will portray how each army set its strategic goal and then related its military operations to accomplish it. In both cases, the final analysis will reveal how training programs were developed and conducted to support their respective views of warfare.

Chapter 3

When Winning Was Not Enough: The Reform of the German Army, 1939-1940

What must be emphasized is that the German army in its “lessons learned analysis” of the Polish campaign did not use its studies to support existing doctrine. Rather it used its after-action reports to improve doctrine and military standards throughout the army.²⁰

On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland with a force of 52 divisions representing the flower of its armed forces.²¹ In a campaign lasting twenty-four days, Germany inflicted a defeat incorporating a degree of speed and magnitude not seen since the glory days of the *Kaiserheer* of the 19th century. Employing its traditional battle of annihilation, or *Vernichtungsschlacht*, the *Wehrmacht* used armored spearheads followed by fast-marching infantry divisions to first encircle and then destroy the units of the forward-deployed Polish Army. To the Western Allies the German victory was a stunning success, apparently the direct result of Hitler’s well-planned and executed rearmament program of the latter half of the 1930s.²² While there is no question that the campaign was an operational success in every regard, the fact remains that even before the fighting ended the German army high command, or OKH, was expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of its units, especially its infantry divisions.²³

This conclusion was especially troubling to the high command in light of the Anglo-French declaration of war and Hitler’s announcement on 27 September of his intention to attack and destroy the Western Allies as soon as possible.²⁴ Thus, instead of looking forward to a period of recovery, the German leadership on the contrary foresaw imminent operations on the Western Front against the armies of France and Britain. This chapter examines the preparation of the German army to execute this formidable task: the

reform of its fighting forces in wartime. It begins by describing the antecedents of the army's deficiencies to provide the necessary background for the causes of reform. This is followed by an assessment of the German strategic measure of effectiveness and how the army gathered the necessary information it required. An analysis of specific performance shortfalls identified in Poland follows. The chapter concludes with a detailed scrutiny of the corrective training actions taken by the army while conducting defensive operations against the Western Allies.

The genesis of the German army's reform is found in the massive expansion undertaken by the *Wehrmacht* from 1935 to 1939. Forbidden the creation of a traditional mass army by the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had no pool of trained reservists or the facilities for creating them in short order. As a consequence, the classes of 1901-1913 had received no military preparation at all.²⁵ This lack of trained manpower placed Germany at a significant disadvantage in comparison to its potential opponents, who had continued to train conscripts each year.²⁶ Hitler's solution was to decree, on 16 March 1935, the "abolition of a mercenary army and the formation of a national army" supported by compulsory military service.²⁷ As a result, the army alone expanded from a force of approximately 240,000 at the beginning of 1935 to one of 3,706,104 men upon mobilization for the invasion of Poland. By increasing its strength eighteen times over in 5 years, it had of necessity to contend with a dilution of the professionalism characteristic of the old 100,000 man *Reichsheer*.

To maintain a minimum standard of proficiency in the midst of wholesale expansion, the Germans adopted a tiered approach to mobilization and readiness referred to as the *welle*, or "wave" system. This system provided for the creation of four "waves"

of divisions that would allow Germany to fully or partially mobilize based on the readiness of divisions and the nature of the crisis. Accordingly, the first wave divisions (to include all motorized and *panzer* troops) consisted of active duty soldiers. In turn, the divisions of the second wave were composed of young reservists with a minimum of military training, while those of the third wave consisted of older militia (*landwehr*). The final wave were referred to as depot divisions to be formed from cadres provided by the training units and subsequently filled with recruits.²⁸

Through this system, by September 1939 the Germans could field for the invasion of Poland 98 divisions or independent brigades. Their composition was as follows:

- 52 Active Divisions (First Wave), of which 12 were *panzer*/motorized
- 15 Reserve Divisions (Second Wave)
- 21 Militia (*Landwehr*) Divisions (Third Wave)
- 10 Depot Divisions (Fourth Wave)²⁹

In itself, this system incorporated both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, Professor Larry Addington notes that while all divisions were not of uniformly high quality, the Germans were capable of strategic surprise based on the speed of mobilization that the *welle* system provided.

While every other Continental European army required lengthy mobilization to act offensively, the German Army was in a position to strike with little delay and without the warning associated with general mobilization of the traditional type.³⁰

This is only true, however, to the extent that the active divisions measured up to the task at hand. Military operations that exceeded their capability naturally demanded the use of the subsequent waves. General Siegfried Westphal, G3 of a second wave infantry division at the start of the Polish campaign, provides the following insight into the state of readiness of the second through fourth waves.

Of the remaining 46 divisions (46 of 98 were reserve units), 10 were near ready, formed from replacement batteries and battalions of the peacetime army. The other 36 reserve and militia divisions were for the time being entirely unserviceable. Not a single company out of all forty six divisions had more than 8 per cent regular soldiers in its ranks. The number of active officers was small, and did not exceed 15 percent of the strength.³¹

While on the eve of Poland the *Heer* could field a formidable number of divisions, only half of them were actually serviceable due to the difficulty of overcoming years of neglect in a relatively short time. Even so, the active divisions represented a very capable tool, in that the *welle* system rendered them even more flexible due to the speed with which they could be employed. Though the expansion of the army was undertaken at a much more rapid pace than the high command intended, their practical solution to the problems of time and resources embodied in the *welle* system ensured that the army remained a credible instrument should it be called on for active operations.³²

A major second order effect of the enlargement of the armed forces occurred in the area of officer training and proficiency. The officer's role in training was paramount, due to the fact that "the army insisted that one man, the company commander, assume sole responsibility for the education and training of a company."³³ The 3000 regular officers that provided this training nucleus in 1933 would increase to over 100,000 by the outbreak of war. Even with the use of expedients such as direct commissioning of NCOs, incorporation of discharged former officers, and relaxation of training standards, by 1939 only one in six officers could loosely be termed a trained professional. The conditions among the NCO ranks was similar.³⁴

Leaving equipment shortages aside, the state of the German Army's training at the time of its entry into World War II left much to be desired, due to rapid expansion forced

upon its professional core by Hitler's desire for a large, mass army. In terms of trained officers and NCOs, these shortages were even more serious in that they represented the wellspring from which new units could be brought up to standard. Though its accomplishments in Poland obscured these deficiencies from outside observers, the fact remains that the instrument wielded by the General Staff was not up to its own standards even at the outbreak of conflict.³⁵

The victory in Poland represented a significant accomplishment, the shortcomings of the army notwithstanding. In the course of a short campaign, the army destroyed or dispersed every active and reserve Polish formation at a cost of only three percent of the total German forces engaged.³⁶ By any standard, a sterling achievement. Yet by what standard did the high command judge itself? In this case, the German Army had a well defined and understood strategic measure of effectiveness, the battle of annihilation or *Vernichtungsschlacht*.³⁷

The *Heer*'s idea of the battle of annihilation had roots extending back to the mid-nineteenth century. Since that time, the German army embraced the idea that the ultimate aim of a campaign should be the rapid destruction of the enemy's fielded forces, the strategic impact of which was the inability of the opponent to continue the war. This idea still served as the basis of tactical operations, expressed in concrete terms in the *Truppenführung*, or Troop Command. This manual, published in 1933, remained the capstone of tactical operations employed by the German Army throughout the majority of World War II. Its contents stressed initiative, decisive maneuver, and envelopment as keynotes. In this way, German divisions would destroy the enemy in a series of battles and engagements, the ways and means linked to the selected strategic goal.³⁸

Far from being hidebound by tradition, however, the *Truppenführung* embraced the new motorized arm. It espoused the use of these forces as the cutting edge of the army to set the conditions for the destruction of the enemy in a pocket by marching infantry divisions, a form of maneuver known to the army as the *Kesselschlacht*.³⁹ Intelligence efforts were directed at the disposition and strength of regular enemy forces and monitored their destruction. Friendly operational effectiveness was assessed by the attainment of objectives in the rear of these forces, allowing their subsequent destruction while minimizing the cost to friendly forces by avoiding frontal battles of attrition.⁴⁰ Thus, the German ideas relating to Rosen's strategic measure were well known to the army, and the requisite mechanisms for gauging their accomplishment were already in place. This can be seen in light of the army's response to the victory in Poland.

On 27 September 1939, Hitler announced to his stunned generals that Germany must attack the Western Allies immediately, before they could absorb the lessons learned in Poland and to preempt any attack they might make into the vulnerable Ruhr.⁴¹ At the time, however, the army was still in the process of digesting the implications of the Polish campaign, and, at any rate, "had already planned for the purely defensive operations on the Western Front; its forces required time to refit and complete their training."⁴² By this time, however, the high command was already beginning its assessment of its performance in the recent campaign.

This process began with while combat operations were still underway. On 14 September 1939, a conference was conducted at OKH with the Commanding General, Chief of Staff, and several General Staff branch chiefs in attendance. Preliminary and informal impressions of field commanders were discussed, with the consensus formed

that although the military machine worked well, it was not up to the standard that the “old hands” remembered from the opening days of World War I.⁴³ As unit after action reports, or *Erfarungsberichte*, started to arrive, more conclusive evidence indicated that the army, especially the infantry, needed improvement. This is especially significant, since these indicators mostly applied to the better divisions of the army, not the reserve formations.⁴⁴

Critical to this collection effort was the climate in which it was conducted. According to Professor Williamson Murray, there were no “Potemkin Villages” in *Das Heer*. He describes the reporting process as follows:

The higher the headquarters, the more demanding and dissatisfied were commanders with operational performance. Moreover, the entire German system during this period seems to have involved a greater degree of trust and honesty between the levels of command. German officers in command positions were not afraid to express their belief that their units were deficient when circumstances justified such comments.⁴⁵

Further, Murray attributes much of the success of the entire reform effort to this honesty, a characteristic maintained until the very end of the war. Since Rosen explicitly states that the use of information directly relates to an army’s ability to obtain accurate information relating to its strategic measure of effectiveness, this climate is of material importance.

Again, though the General Staff was in agreement that the recent operation “fully confirmed our tactical principles,”⁴⁶ specific measures had to be taken immediately, especially in the infantry divisions expected to do the majority of the fighting in the West. This training would apply not only to the first wave divisions of the active army, but also to bring the remaining waves up to the same standard. Though all units were to train

hard, "OKH viewed officer training as the crucial factor."⁴⁷ With these principles in mind, the high command started issuing training guidance on 13 October that would form the basis for all training conducted by the army during the Winter of 1939-40.⁴⁸

The organ that initiated this process was the Training Office of the General Staff. This organization existed in the peacetime army, working under the supervision of the commander in chief. The head of this office had at his disposal four arms (*waffen*) inspectors for infantry, artillery, engineers and mobile (*panzer/motorized*) troops. An organizational flaw was detected in this structure, however, in that upon mobilization it transferred to the Replacement Army. Since the Replacement Army was charged with the training of conscripts and new formations in the German interior, a gap existed in the training structure of the Field Army that conducted actual combat operations. In effect, no organization existed to specifically correct the deficiencies of the Field Army.⁴⁹

OKH quickly solved the problem on 10 October by appointing Colonel Edgar Röhricht the new Chief of the Training Office. It simultaneously created four arms inspectorates (*Waffengenerale*) for the Field Army directly answerable to the commander in chief.⁵⁰ As his first official act, Röhricht examined the policies of his World War I predecessors and was not encouraged. Though the army fought in many theaters in that conflict, its manuals were very general in nature and did not differentiate between the various enemies and local conditions. As a result, he noted that commanders in the first war tended to circumvent the Training Office and publish their own combat pamphlets.

According to Professor Lewis, "Röhricht favored this solution, but wanted his office to coordinate such efforts."⁵¹ He therefore determined that its major task would be the collection, collation and distribution of combat experience to "provide the troops in

the field with helpful information.” In future, all field headquarters forwarded pertinent documents to the Training Office.⁵² Thus, rather than attempt to constantly revise and publish lengthy field manuals, Röhricht and his office concentrated on the production of timely, relevant combat experience. In this fashion, the army high command established an information conduit and clearing house to support its training effort. Through the Training Office, combat experience was gathered and quickly put to use training soldiers.

As previously mentioned, the Training Office issued its first field directive on 13 October 1939. Entitled “The Training of the Field Army,” this memo formed the basis of the army’s training through April, 1940.⁵³ In the first section, this directive established specific mission essential task lists for the 1st, 2d, and 4th wave units. Tasks such as attack of fortifications, exploitation, and defense against air and tank attacks were included reflecting the offensive nature of the coming campaign. Officer and NCO leadership received special attention in the second section, along with old-fashioned “spit and polish” discipline.⁵⁴

The control of this training program rested with OKH based on recommendations from the Training Office. In spite of the many difficulties inherent in training that Winter: in contact with the enemy; an additional army expansion program; severe weather; and limited resources; the high command took the following measures.⁵⁵ First, OKH centrally scheduled divisions for intensive training at the army’s facilities at Grafenwöhr and Ohrdruf. It also assumed responsibility for slating officers and NCOs to attend existing leadership schools. In a novel decision, OKH transferred most of the cadre of the Infantry School at Doberitz to active units at the Western Front, replacing them with veterans from the West or the Polish Campaign.⁵⁶ In a final measure, the Commanding

General, von Brauchitsch, issued in October a monthly evaluation report for division and corps commanders for them to indicate their formation's current level of effectiveness. Remembering the lack of similar, reliable information available to senior commanders in World War I, he intended that a clear measure of unit effectiveness exist prior to and during combat operations.⁵⁷

Röhricht's Training Section also laid out a detailed set of standards for the Army Groups' advanced infantry and artillery schools that were established in December 1939. OKH's interest in standardization of training extended as far as the development of a 12 day training schedule for company and platoon commanders at these courses. Finally, the high command insisted that the various headquarters forward after action critiques of these programs to ensure that the process underwent constant revision.⁵⁸

The general staff itself undertook to train battalion and regimental commanders at its facility at Königsbrück. Traditional techniques such as lectures, map exercises and tactical exercises without troops were common. In another novel measure, an entire infantry division was placed at the disposal of the program for use in testing the solutions developed by students and to demonstrate to commanders the latest tactics, techniques and procedures derived from the combat experience arriving at the Training Office. By May of 1940, several successive groups of 300 commanders passed through the three or four week courses offered at this facility.⁵⁹

The programs within the divisions themselves aimed first at individual and then small unit collective training. Next, the program shifted to larger unit, battalion and regimental, exercises focusing on the integration of combined arms at every level. In December 1939, the army began sending individual battalions one-day's distance to the

rear to local training areas.⁶⁰ This process, however, created difficulties for committed units in the West since the availability of these local areas was limited. In many cases, these events had to be delayed until the divisions themselves could rotate through one of the army's regular major training areas in Germany.⁶¹

An example of a unit's preparation for the Campaign of 1940 is provided by the 208 Infantry Division, a second wave unit activated in September 1939. Initially, the unit was filled with a large percentage of Landwehr personnel. In October, it started the following training program:

- 2 weeks of individual training,
- 1 week of squad training,
- 1 week of platoon training,
- 1.5 weeks for company training,
- 1.5 weeks for larger unit training.

The end of this cycle witnessed the release many of the older militia soldiers unable to meet the division's standards. Thus, in February 1940 it ceased all larger unit training and concentrated on the integration of an influx of new recruits. Beginning in March, the division returned to collective exercises and by the end of the month was deemed combat ready.⁶² This cycle was typical of the training programs of many of the divisions committed to the offensive.

According to Professor Martin van Creveld, one of the areas in which the German army especially excelled was its training of replacements.⁶³ In principle, the Replacement Army was responsible for the training of recruits, officers candidates, NCOs, and specialists:

However, the Field Army was responsible for merging replacements with their units, for which purpose each division was provided with a *Feldersatzbattalion* (FE), or field replacement battalion, carrying out additional training during times of rest, and for supplying advanced training for officers and NCOs.⁶⁴

This unit was organic to all divisions and accompanied it into combat. Consisting of three rifle companies, each closely aligned with one of the division's three infantry regiments, it provided a steady stream of replacements trained by the division's own personnel. In many cases, these men actually led the trainees into combat.⁶⁵

Another premise upon which the German Army based its training was homogeneity. Accordingly, divisions drew their recruits from the same geographical area within a home military district. Upon mobilization, each division left behind in this district a battalion cadre designated as its depot replacement unit. This unit, unlike the *feldersatzbattalion*, operated under the aegis of the Replacement Army, training replacements and dispatching them to the field.⁶⁶ According to van Creveld, "officers in the training battalion and its parent division were expected to know each other personally and to correspond and visit frequently." A regular rotation between the two took place, especially as it was often wounded personnel who trained the division's recruits during their recovery period.⁶⁷

A final feature of the system was the fact that recruits never moved forward as individual replacements. Instead, they were organized into "march battalions" of 800-1000 men. The parent division provided a cadre to command the unit, combined with officers and NCOs returning to the front from hospitals or schools. Organized to fight if necessary, these units served as a temporary "home" for the new soldiers prior to regular assignment. Upon arrival at the front these battalions were dissolved, their personnel

transferred to the *feldersatzbattalion*. After an adjustment period in the FE, the recruits reached the front familiar with local conditions, standing operating procedures and their commanders.⁶⁸ This process of recruit training, reception, staging and onward movement was deemed a critical aspect of German combat proficiency, and was an integral part of their combat training system to the last days of the war.

The training program of the German Army prior to France started as a reaction to necessity and ended with the commitment of 135 divisions in May of 1940.⁶⁹ Growing by fits and starts, it ended by establishing the training mechanisms the army would retain until very near the last days of the war. Dividing responsibility between the Field and Replacement Armies, it provided individual and unit training for officers, NCOs, specialists, and commanders at all levels. Not only did it maintain a steady stream of replacements, it ensured that their training never stopped. The German soldier almost always entered combat better prepared than the soldiers of his opponent. In his reflections on the German Army, Professor van Creveld assesses their training program as follows:

It systematically sent its best men forward to the front, constantly and deliberately weakening the rear. In matters of training, promotion, decorations, etc., its organization was designed to produce and reward the fighting men. It went for quality, and quality was what it got. In this, without a doubt, lay the secret of its fighting power.⁷⁰

As the campaign in France indicates, the program was ultimately successful. The hastily mobilized reserve divisions particularly benefited, “being transformed from an armed rabble into troops.”⁷¹

This chapter focused on the reform of the German Army under combat conditions, an exercise referred to by Williamson Murray as a “Case Study in

Professionalism.”⁷² In the next chapter, an even more difficult trial will be examined, the U.S. Army’s attempts at innovation during Vietnam. Perhaps no other case in history illustrates the difficulty of adapting an army’s training under fire.

Chapter 4

A Desperate Need to Innovate: The U.S. Army in Vietnam

When we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Vietcong could be quickly beaten. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost.

Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War

From the time of French exodus in 1954 through the Spring of 1965, the United States Army failed to generate a force in the Republic of Vietnam effectively able to counter the insurgency tearing the country apart.⁷³ American advisors, shunting aside French experience, drew on their most recent memories of combat and created an army in their own image. Attributing the failure of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to any source except its imported doctrine and force structure, in 1965 the US Army introduced conventional troops and ideas to carry the burden and defeat the Viet Cong and their presumed masters in Hanoi.⁷⁴ Saigon fell ten years later.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the Army’s wartime training that ultimately contributed to this failure, based as it was on an incorrect strategic measure of effectiveness.⁷⁵ Employing a strategy of attrition based on massive firepower to force the enemy to abandon the conflict, instead it was the United States that ended the war exhausted. As the enemy “body count” mounted without an end to the war in sight, more and better ways were tried in an attempt to realize the benefits of reform. Unfortunately,

what very few soldiers understood at the time was that reform would not work; instead, innovation alone could provide the answer. This chapter begins by examining the roots of American doctrine and training in the years prior to 1965 to gain an insight into the army committed to Vietnam and the basis for its need to innovate. This is followed by an assessment of the American strategic measure of effectiveness as this was understood and applied in that conflict. The chapter concludes with a study of the training conducted by the Army as it attempted to improve its operational performance while fighting a war in which it had no previous experience in winning.

The genesis of the Army's lack of preparedness for counterinsurgency (COIN) is found in the aftermath of the Korean War. With the Soviets and Chinese apparently contained in Northeast Asia, the focus of US attention shifted to its "worst case" scenario, the defeat of a major Soviet offensive in Europe.⁷⁶ Coupled with this was the Eisenhower administration's effort to reduce defense spending by emphasizing the nuclear policy of "massive retaliation" as a more cost effective alternative to large, standing conventional forces. The dependence on nuclear weapons and consequent reduced budgets meant that the Army lacked the resources to focus on more than one contingency.⁷⁷ The result was the "Pentomic Division," a force designed to fight on the nuclear battlefield of Western Europe, but ill-suited, according to Colonel Robert A. Doughty, for "conducting combat operations throughout the world in a nuclear or non-nuclear environment and against a variety of enemy forces."⁷⁸

As a result, the commanding general of the US Continental Army Command (CONARC) initiated a study to determine a possible replacement for the Pentomic Division in January 1959.⁷⁹ The eventual product was the Reorganization Objectives

Army Division, (ROAD), approved by the Army Chief of Staff in May 1961. This divisional structure, to be implemented in May 1962, represents a reversion to the organization of the armored division and its combat commands which had evolved from World War II through the post-Korean War years. This configuration was to be applied to the Army's infantry, armored, mechanized and airborne divisions, with the aim of making them equally effective on nuclear and conventional battlefields in varying types of terrain.⁸⁰ According to Colonel Doughty, "ROAD provided the basis for the resurrection of a powerful conventional force capability and for the shift in emphasis from nuclear to non-nuclear warfare."⁸¹ Echoing the new administration's awareness that "tactical nuclear weapons could not be substituted for conventional forces in the most likely types of conflict envisaged for the 1960s,"⁸² the Army had created the means to wage a form of conventional, firepower-oriented warfare with which it had grown comfortable during the Korean War.

According to noted author Richard Krepinevich in his book The Army and Vietnam, this firepower doctrine became the basis for what he labels as the "Army Concept." In his words,

The Army Concept of war is, basically, the Army's perception of how wars *ought* to be waged and is reflected in the way the Army organizes and trains its troops for battle. The characteristics of the Army Concept are two: a focus on mid-intensity, or conventional, war and a reliance on high volumes of firepower to minimize casualties -- in effect, the substitution of material costs at every available opportunity to avoid payment in blood.⁸³

Krepinevich's ideas are mirrored in Colonel Doughty's research, who also awards much of the blame for a transition toward firepower to the Army's prolonged defensive experience in Korea. Evidence for this trend is found throughout the decade between the

1950s and early 1960s, manifested by “the greater emphasis on the defense of Western Europe, and the long term focus on attrition rather than maneuver.”⁸⁴

In sum, compared to the insights gained in three conventional wars over the previous half-century, the Army lacked both the theoretical knowledge and practical experience necessary to prepare for Vietnam. In addition, given that the service operated during that same period in a resource-constrained environment, it was almost inevitable that it prepared for the war it felt most comfortable with.⁸⁵ In the absence of any great inducement for change, the Army created a force capable of conventional operations most suited for European battlefields, but lacking a clear understanding of the requirements necessary to counter insurgent guerrillas.

In the final analysis, the Army initiated its preparation for counterinsurgency during a transition from the nuclear to the conventional battlefield in the midst of a doctrinal vacuum.⁸⁶ As war drew ever closer, an unfortunate by-product of its many hastily assembled responses was a pre-occupation with tactical methods. According to Doughty, this meant that,

The elusive ideal of identifying the goals of military action within counterinsurgency was thus overwhelmed by the more immediate task of developing tactical organizations, equipment, and doctrine. Where there should have been clarity, confusion reigned.⁸⁷

By 1965, the Army’s response included the adoption of the helicopter as a full partner to its tactical doctrine of firepower. What it lacked, however, was a clear understanding of how its conventional ways and means should be applied to the ends of counterinsurgency. In the following section of the chapter, this relationship will be discussed in more detail.

The war that the US Army found itself fighting in 1965 was not one to its liking. Denied the opportunity to seek a “decisive” outcome through an invasion of the North, it settled instead for a contest of exhaustion, in which the Army could bring its advantages in firepower, airmobility and logistics to bear to wear down the enemy physically.⁸⁸ This course was chosen even though most participants contended that counterinsurgency operations “should be combated through a combination of military operations and social reform.”⁸⁹ While the service could not influence the relative merit of the various regimes of the Republic of Vietnam, nonetheless, its military operations should have been related to the maintenance of that regime through the protection of its populace. This protection is vital in counterinsurgency, since the aim of the insurgents is to create a feeling of insecurity among the people in order to undermine the government’s legitimacy in their eyes.⁹⁰

It was in this determination of the strategic end in which the Army made its first, major error. By adopting, in the words of Krepinevich, “A Strategy of Tactics,” the Army focused on operations oriented on killing the enemy and defeating his formations.⁹¹ According to conventional wisdom, the strategic goal of protecting the government and people would be realized through these means. In fact, according to a study conducted by the MACV long range planning group in 1968, the result was just the opposite:

Destruction of NVA and VC units and individuals -- that is, the “kill VC” syndrome, has become an end in itself -- an end that at times has been self defeating. To accomplish the most difficult task of the war -- *and, really the functional reason for the US to be here* -- that of providing security to the Vietnamese people -- we have relied on the numerous, but only marginally effective, ill-equipped and indifferently led Vietnamese paramilitary and police units. The Vietcong thrive in an element of insecurity. It is essential for them to demonstrate that the GVN is *not* capable of providing security to its citizens. *And, they have succeeded.*⁹²

Thus, the ways and means of conflict had become indistinguishable from the strategic outcome. The US war machine chose to fight only a part of the total war, leaving the other, more difficult and longer portion to indigenous forces that were not resourced properly to perform the mission.⁹³

The relation of these ways and means to the strategic end was expressed in terms of the “body count.” In contrast to the atmosphere of honesty surrounding the German Army’s reform, US units believed that “inflated body counts were acceptable, if not officially encouraged.”⁹⁴ This was a hold-over from the reception received by reports dating back as far as the early advisory days. “Feedback to the brass indicating that MACV’s methods were working was eagerly accepted; reports of failure were, for the most part, ignored.”⁹⁵ Thus, in gathering information relating to how the employment of ways and means affected the strategic outcome, the Army created an environment inimical to innovation. It accepted what it wanted to hear, and chose not to believe information that told it that what it was doing was wrong.

This information shortfall was exacerbated by the Army’s collection and use of intelligence. Intelligence operations, for the most part, were designed to locate and track the major fielded units of the NVA and VC. They were not designed to penetrate and identify the insurgent networks within friendly villages. While relatively successful in accomplishing the former, by ignoring enemy activities at the village level the Army had no visibility of the elements that directly affected the physical and psychological security of the population. Since this was a long-term problem requiring an intimate knowledge of the people and their situation, it is not surprising that intelligence operations oriented toward “search and destroy” missions did not yield the other half of the intelligence

picture the Army needed to assess its strategic measure. The personnel and resources were either not there, or were not there long enough.⁹⁶

As the war progressed, the Army looked for more and better ways to increase the attrition inflicted on the enemy. However, these efforts at reform did not convince those outside Vietnam that simply increasing the body count would achieve the desired end. This disagreement came to head in the wake of the Tet Offensive in 1968. At that time, the military requested major reinforcements for Vietnam.⁹⁷ In response, the new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, questioned the new deployment with the following words.

There can be no guarantee that this very substantial additional deployment would leave us a year from today in any more favorable military position. All that can be said is that the additional troops would enable us to kill more of the enemy and would provide more security *if* the enemy does not offset them by reinforcements of his own.⁹⁸

With the election of President Nixon that same year and the initiation of the “Vietnamization” of the conflict, the issue became moot. The United States was leaving Vietnam, having chosen poorly in the context of strategic effectiveness.

Taken together, the US Army fell into the gaping jaws of the dilemma between innovation and reform. In effect, it lacked previous experience with the employment of conventional forces in a counterinsurgency campaign with which to form an institutional measure of effectiveness. Having deciding on an inappropriate strategic end, it employed ways and means to achieve it and then created information pathways to link them together. Since the service’s information only allowed it to see what it wanted to see, it never achieved cognizance of its shortfalls; it did not know what it did not know. Unless it chose another strategic end state or produce a different relationship of ways and means

to its existing goal, its reform efforts would never meet the criteria for innovation as expressed by Rosen. As a result, the Army's training reflected flawed notions of how to fight the war, further hampering its efforts to innovate since its means remained unsuitable for the task at hand.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the US Army's efforts to train itself while at war in Vietnam. On the whole, these programs reflect a commitment to conventional operations and lack of a coherent doctrine for counterinsurgency. Having said this, the Army did attempt to improve the caliber of its training as the war progressed, both in terms of quality and content. The following section details how it went about doing this. First, it examines those courses specifically designed for staff and advisory personnel assigned to Vietnam. Next, individual training for both officers and enlisted soldiers are surveyed with a special emphasis on the infantry since that arm bore the brunt of the fighting. Training conducted by units in Vietnam follows, to include the incorporation and training of replacement personnel.

The first time that the United States Army initiated training specifically aimed at preparing personnel for Vietnam occurred in February 1962. Taught at the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, NC, it was known as the Military Assistance Training Advisors (MATA) Course. Intended to provide officers and NCOs deploying as advisors to Vietnam with a working knowledge of the conditions they could expect to encounter, it offered familiarization in counterinsurgency tactics, techniques and procedures as well as exposure to some basic Vietnamese language skills.⁹⁹

The program of instruction (POI) was at first four and later six weeks long. This course was retained through the end of the war, and encompassed many feedback

mechanisms to make it more effective. Among them were the practice of assigning advisors returning from a tour in Vietnam to the faculty, as well as regular visits by the staff to the theater to gain additional experience.¹⁰⁰ The course had two major shortcomings, however, especially in the early years. First, though designed to prepare soldiers for Vietnam, the COIN lessons eliminated any experience gained by the French in Indochina. Instead, examples from Malaya and Greece were used as vehicles for teaching the principles of counterinsurgency.¹⁰¹ The second deficiency was that too few students benefited from the instruction presented. As late as the end of 1963, with 16,000 personnel in Vietnam, fewer than 3,000 advisors had been trained.¹⁰² This is reflective of the hasty nature of the Army's reaction to counterinsurgency preparation mentioned previously.

Since the Army's major focus prior to Vietnam had been the defense of Western Europe, individual enlisted soldier training prior to 1965 did not contain any COIN related subjects or treat it as a major mission in the POI.¹⁰³ In 1964, as the realization dawned that deployment to the theater was imminent, many Basic Combat Training (BCT) and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) courses were shortened in order to permit rapid assignment of trained soldiers to operational units in the process of pre-deployment training. In an accompanying move, many thousands of graduates from BCT were assigned directly to units for completion of AIT. Shortened training cycles were at best a stop-gap measure, however. As the BDM Corporation Study on Strategic Lessons Learned states: "With the one-year tour in effect, the implications were clear: most of the combat experience gained by these first units would be lost at the end of the year."¹⁰⁴

As this phenomenon began to make itself felt, the Army modified its recruit programs in 1967 by extending AIT an additional week to accommodate a field exercise oriented on combat in Vietnam. In 1968, recruits were taught to use the new M16 rifle in BCT.¹⁰⁵ By the early 1970s and the start of the program of “Vietnamization,” however, emphasis once again shifted away from a strictly Vietnam-oriented POI to one that reflected the Army’s world-wide mission. Accordingly, instruction in subjects such as mechanized operations and urban fighting were substituted for some of the counterinsurgency topics.¹⁰⁶

The Army’s training of infantry recruits met with mixed success. Partly, this was due to President Johnson’s decision to forego reserve mobilization with its accompanying activation of four reserve training divisions. As a result, CONARC had to draw on its own assets to both train the active army and provide troops for deployment. The effect was a “drop in readiness in Strategic Army Forces, an overburdening on the school and training system, and a delay in preparing units for overseas deployment.”¹⁰⁷

A second major defect was in the area of weapons proficiency. In 1965, the M16 rifle was a new system, and on many occasions soldiers were trained in CONUS with the M14 rifle, its predecessor, only to receive an M16 on arrival in country.¹⁰⁸ It is therefore unsurprising that many soldiers lacked confidence in their weapons, considering that adequate M16s were not available until 1969 to conduct the requisite training throughout the Army’s BCT system.¹⁰⁹

The final, and most serious flaw in individual training was the lack of preparation and indoctrination on the role of US forces and the nature of the soldier’s role in counterinsurgency. Colonel (Retired) David Hackworth, writing in 1969 at the conclusion

of his second tour in Vietnam as a battalion commander, expressed this problem as follows:

Another critical weakness was the soldier's lack of preparation to deal with the Vietnamese people. He was not sufficiently oriented concerning the customs of Vietnam, the purpose of the war, the fact that he was a guest in Vietnam, and how to conduct himself as an invited guest and not an "occupational trooper."

Too often, according to Hackworth, the soldier would negate much of the good will gained by his comrades through some thoughtless act perpetrated in his role as the "ugly American."¹¹⁰

Commencing in 1965, the Army expanded by fifty percent to meet the personnel needs of Vietnam. As a result of expansion and combat action, the service quickly experienced a critical shortage of noncommissioned officers, especially in the grades of Sergeant (E5) and Staff Sergeant (E6). The result was the advent of the Infantry Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Combat Leaders Course (INOCCLC) in mid-1967. Designed to train NCOs especially for duty in Vietnam, it was expanded in November of that year to include instruction in 13 other occupational specialties and continued to expand until late 1971.¹¹¹ Many soldiers attended this 21 to 24 week-long course immediately after BCT and AIT, over 11,000 enlisted men in 1969 alone. While well trained in the technical aspects of their duties, feedback from the field indicated that these NCOs lacked requisite experience.¹¹² General Donn Starry, commander of the 11th ACR in 1969, assesses them as follows:

We had a bunch of inexperienced NCOs leading a bunch of inexperienced soldiers, overwatched by a bunch of inexperienced lieutenants and captains . . . The result on the ground just wasn't good at all.¹¹³

General Starry's inclusion of officer inexperience highlights certain problems with their training, especially in the Basic (IOBC) and Advanced Course (IOAC) curricula. In 1964, the IOBC program of instruction included 495 hours administered in nine weeks. This was a dramatic decrease in length from the Korean-era course of 22 weeks and 880 hours.¹¹⁴ In 1964, 21 percent of the POI was devoted to counterinsurgency, with no hours devoted to training methods, either in a combat or field environment.¹¹⁵ The percentage of COIN training more than doubled by 1969, but only five hours related to training had been included by that time. In all, IOBC reached a total of 551 hours over ten weeks of training prior by 1969 (as opposed to 16 weeks today).¹¹⁶ That the course was not designed to prepare officers for combat is made clear by the Army's assignment policy: "Newly commissioned infantry and armor second lieutenants are not assigned to a combat zone until they complete four months in leadership-type positions."¹¹⁷ The training afforded prospective company commanders was along similar lines. IOAC's inclusion of COIN training peaked in 1965 with 15 percent of the POI devoted to that subject, dropping to 7 percent by 1969. According to Krepinevich, "In no year of the war did training directed purely at COIN exceed 6 percent of the total POI."¹¹⁸

The training that a more senior officer could expect to receive in counterinsurgency was even more limited. According to Dr. Ivan Birrer, a senior official at CGSOC from 1948 through 1978, "For the most part, the tactical problems continued to be concerned with land warfare as we had customarily thought of it -- on a large land mass." As long as the course could certify that a student received a requisite number of hours of counterinsurgency instruction, the school was rated as complying with Army directives. Dr. Birrer goes onto stress the point by stating, "But the point to be made is that at no

time . . . did unconventional warfare really occupy any substantial place in the College Program.”¹¹⁹

The Army War College curriculum was even worse. From 1959-1964 none of the sub-courses offered related to conflict outside conventional operations. Beginning in 1964, the school offered a one-month module devoted to the general study of “developing areas” with no special emphasis on counterinsurgency. Again, according to Krepinevich,

It was not until 1968, *seven years* after President Kennedy’s call for the Army to get moving on counterinsurgency and *three years* after the introduction of US combat troops into Vietnam, that the War College adopted a short (three week) block of instruction on “Army Internal Defense and Development Operations.”¹²⁰

From lowest to highest, the Army’s individual training was deficient for two primary reasons. First, it could not react fast enough to the changes necessitated by a transition from peacetime concentration on conventional operations to wartime expansion in a counterinsurgency environment.¹²¹ Training remained generic or inadequate, leaving the field units themselves to complete an individual’s training. Second, the Army’s decision to rotate personnel after 12 months in theater meant that experienced soldiers were rarely able to improve or pass on many of their combat lessons learned.¹²² As John Paul Vann, writing in 1969, put it, “The United States has not been in Vietnam for nine years, but for one year nine times.”¹²³

A further aspect of individual training is the preparation received in the theater itself. During the Vietnam war, committed units were well aware of the need to supplement the training of replacements prior to their commitment in combat. This training generally followed the guidelines outlined by Colonel Sidney B. Berry in his Military Review article entitled “Observations of a Brigade Commander” published in

1968. Of varying lengths, these courses included such topics as weapons training, squad/platoon tactics, VC mines and boobytraps, road clearing operations, and patrolling.¹²⁴ Though judged to be extremely useful, this vital activity never achieved the impact it could have due to the impact of the Army's rotation policy and the limited resources devoted to them.¹²⁵

An example of this phenomenon can be found in information obtained from a Quarterly Command Report of the 25th Infantry Division for the period 1 November 1968 through 31 January 1969. At this time the division operated a "Reinforcement Training Center" commanded by a first lieutenant that provided three courses of instruction at Cu Chi, RVN. The first was the Reinforcement Training School, a five-day orientation course on Vietnam that trained 5,071 students. The second, The Mines, Boobytraps and Tunnels Course lasted one day and was completed by 6,724 personnel. A ten day field leadership course for fire team and squad leaders was conducted by the Lighting Combat Leaders Course and graduated 663 men. In all, this detachment trained over 12,000 students in 92 days, a major task for a small detachment to accomplish effectively.¹²⁶ Considering that from November to January the division turned-over in excess of one third of its personnel,¹²⁷ it is unsurprising that the BDM study notes that "Unit turbulence continued to present commanders with a continuing requirement for in-country training."¹²⁸

Personnel turn-over exacerbated many of the Army's training problems during the conflict. The 12-month tour meant that soldier experience did not stay resident in combat units.¹²⁹ It also had an effect on how commanders viewed their training role. According to the BDM study,

The one year tour and the six-month command tour, in vogue during the Vietnam conflict, operated to the detriment of training. Some commanders seemed to believe their short tours absolved them from the responsibility of resolving underlying training and leadership deficiencies on their units. Problems could be left unsolved for the next commander to face.¹³⁰

In effect, due to high personnel turn-over, especially of command personnel and replacements, divisions never achieved the level of training desired.

The Army's training experience during Vietnam reflected a genuine desire to improve the readiness of its units and reform the institution's performance. The fact that what it actually required was innovation was understood by some, but never acted on by the decision-making establishment. Training programs themselves suffered from the vast expansion of the Army during the war, a phenomenon exacerbated by a policy that directed personnel rotations at twelve-month intervals rather than the rotation of units. The overall effect was an organization that lacked the time and resources to step back and learn from its experience, initiate correct measures of effectiveness, and conduct innovative training to bring its formations to the level of proficiency necessary to wage a new forms of warfare. Instead of a "case study in professionalism," the Army's training efforts in Vietnam might be thought of as a series of stopgaps designed to sustain it from one battle to the next, in the hope that eventually the enemy would decide to quit.

This chapter provided an overview of the Army's effort to train itself to fight in an environment in which it had limited previous experience. Going into Vietnam, most of its members believed that doctrine and training were sufficient for the task at hand. In the next chapter, the experiences from the preceding case studies will be analyzed against the

U.S. Army's current ideas on training to assess the service's ability to train itself under fire and correct, through reform or innovation, training deficiencies identified in combat.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Nothing is more dangerous in war than to rely on peace training; for in modern times, when war is declared, training has always proved out of date.

Major General J. F. C. Fuller

This monograph's purpose has been to examine the ability of armies to adapt their training to the battlefield while actively engaged in war. To this end, it has relied on the theories of Professor Stephen P. Rosen supported by two case studies illustrating his ideas on *reform* and *innovation*. The aim of this chapter is to draw conclusions from the previous portions of the paper, and offer some recommendations to allow the US Army an opportunity to adapt its training in combat.

In comparing the experiences of the German Army in the Second World War and the US Army in Vietnam, the problems inherent in innovation as opposed to reform are apparent. This is unsurprising when one considers their relative degree of difficulty. In the case of reform, the service's strategic measure of effectiveness is essentially correct; it merely needs to improve its ways and means relative to its strategic end. Although this process does not force the institution to change fundamentally, it nevertheless requires a great deal of commitment to improve since the necessary modifications to doctrine, force structure and training must be implemented in a time of war.

In the case of the German Army, experience in Poland indicated that its doctrine and organization were basically sound, but that combat units needed to be brought to a higher standard of performance. Further assisting its reform was the general atmosphere

of trust and honesty prevalent within the chain of command. Leaders at every echelon were not only encouraged, but required, to point out the deficiencies within their units. A final advantage was the nature of Germany's strategic context. With a single theater to concern itself with, all of the *Heer*'s resources, intellectual and physical, were directed at one type of opponent in a style of war with which the organization felt most comfortable. Therefore, the training of the army as a whole could be confidently modified to suit its conflict environment. Essentially, the German reforms entailed an examination of recent experience, an estimate of the requirements of the coming operation, and the implementation of specific training measures to ensure success within a previously validated strategic measure of effectiveness. Though the process sounds simple, its execution has been more the exception than the rule.¹³¹

When the requirement to innovate exists, however, the obstacles to its fulfillment are legion. To quote Professor Rosen:

First, the collection of intelligence that fits into any strategic categories will be difficult (due to the opponent's attempts to thwart this process). In addition, new measures of strategic effectiveness must be invented, new methods of intelligence collection developed, and successful organizational innovations developed in response to that intelligence, all within the few years of active fighting.¹³²

Thus, the organization is required to perceive that its chosen relationship between ends, ways and means is wrong. It must then develop feedback mechanisms that allow it to recognize what it sees and modify its institutional behavior accordingly, surrounded by an environment inimical to the collection and analysis of information.

This is an accurate description of the circumstances faced by the US Army in Vietnam, a struggle rife with obstacles to successful innovation existed. In contrast to the German experience, the information environment was not conducive to the generation of

an accurate estimate of the institution's success or failure. Reports that supported existing ideas of the strategic measure of effectiveness received more credence than those that did not. Thus, even when information indicating that a fundamental change was required did surface, there was little willingness on the part of the service's decision makers to use it. For an organization that "does not know what it does not know," a failure to listen can be fatal.

A further liability was the fact that the US Army did not have any previous, first-hand experience with anything other than total war. Lacking a validation process for its strategic measure of effectiveness similar to that enjoyed by the *Heer* in Poland, the Army grafted its existing doctrine, force structure and training onto the branch of counterinsurgency. The result was a hybrid that failed to perform the function for which US involvement in the conflict was initiated in the first place, the protection of the people and government of Vietnam. As the war dragged on, the Army retained the "body count" as its measure of effectiveness, instituting measures aimed at reform as opposed to innovation, especially in its training.

Innovation was also hampered by America's strategic context. While the *Heer* could prepare *as an army* for the campaign in France, the US Army functioned in a more diverse security environment. Not only was it fighting a counterinsurgency in Vietnam, it had the simultaneous and equally relevant mission of defending Western Europe. Its training programs reflected this tension. At the start of US involvement in Southeast Asia, the training base was clearly focused on the production of soldiers prepared to operate within the previously understood context of a firepower-intensive conventional war.¹³³ As involvement in Vietnam progressed, training became almost exclusively

oriented toward providing personnel prepared to fight in that theater.¹³⁴ By 1970, this emphasis shifted once again toward preparation for war in Europe, as US involvement in Vietnam waned.¹³⁵

Each of these transitions reflects the major contrast between the German and American approaches to training while at war. Though the German Army did enjoy the advantage of a simpler strategic context, it used a significant portion of its resources to provide advanced training of its personnel by the Field Army. *Feldersatzbattalions*, unit schools, and replacement organizations were robustly resourced to ensure that personnel reporting to a division were prepared for their first shots fired in anger. Though the Replacement Army provided initial recruit and leader training, a soldier was not ready for combat until he had been processed through the intensive programs administered by the tactical units. As the war lengthened and the diversity of theaters increased, German training could be tailored to suit the specific conditions present without necessitating a change throughout the institution.

The US system, on the other hand, was just the opposite. In-theater combat training was initiated on an *ad hoc* basis with resources taken out of hide. Since the various schools like the “Lightning Replacement Center” were not up to the task, the institutional training effort was gradually modified to create soldiers with the necessary skills. Lacking the flexibility of its German counterpart, the US Army had little choice except to change its entire training base to prepare soldiers for the conflict environment deemed most critical at the time, Vietnam or Europe.

As Rosen suggests in his discussion of adaptability, the key to the problem lies in the organization’s ability to gather and use information.¹³⁶ The institution’s ability to

alter its training is no exception. In this case, the key piece of information is *combat experience* -- what does and does not work under fire. The critical link is to get this information in a timely manner from the people who have it (veterans) to the people who need it (replacements entering combat or units in combat but requiring retraining).

As was the case in Vietnam, the current system used by the Army to determine the training received by its soldiers is slow, cumbersome and centralized. Under the aegis of the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), the Concept Based Requirements System (CBRS) is used to analyze the combat environment and decide how the Army should fight within it. CBRS is a process that examines the materiel, doctrine and training of the future. It is based on an understanding of Army missions, analysis of the threat, a forecast of future technologies, and a grounding in historical perspective. Out of this process comes the concepts that will eventually be incorporated into school POIs. After staffing and rigorous study, the institution as a whole adopts these new tenets.¹³⁷

In the middle of a war, this feedback system is unwieldy. Combat experience (information) travels from the combat zone back to the training base, the lessons are evaluated and incorporated into schools, and eventually make their way back to the combat zone *via* replacements. In most cases, however, this fresh experience is not effectively integrated into doctrine, since the process of doctrinal review relies very heavily on consensus. Thus, in a war of limited duration this process is almost irrelevant as, in Vietnam, the time required to change the organization can obviate the lessons learned. Though personnel in the combat zone are learning, a constant flow of inexperience leavens the effectiveness of the information they are acquiring.

What is therefore required is a new feedback loop that can more rapidly disseminate combat experience relevant to the theater. This new system should, in effect, both eliminate the necessity to alter the entire training base as well as provide feedback to soldiers in a more timely manner. This is especially important to the post-cold war Army that faces a diversity of threats, levels of conflict, and operational environments. The current institutional system of “one size fits all” followed by battle-focused training within units is not suited for the wide array of tasks the service may be called on to accomplish.¹³⁸

This paper began with the assumption that the Army will not always “get it right” when it comes to the conduct of training prior to a war. In this case it will, of necessity, have to retrain units in contact as well as prepare replacements and follow-on forces for the conditions prevalent in the theater. Unlike the German Army of World War II, however, today’s Army is not prepared to undertake a large-scale effort along these lines. The following paragraphs offer suggestions that, if implemented, could facilitate the process of learning under fire.

First, the inclusion of an organization within the division similar to the German *Feldersatzbattalion* is essential. This measure would eliminate some of the burden currently shouldered by the training base to prepare recruits, NCOs and officers for combat in every unit or theater simultaneously. Instead, much of the onus for conditioning these soldiers could be shifted to the division’s replacement battalion, perhaps called a “Field Training Battalion” (FTB).

In this way, a newly arriving soldier could be taught the tactics, techniques and procedures required by the unit before his assignment to the line. Instead of sending him

directly from AIT or OBC to combat, he would initially be assigned to the FTB that could either be deployed in the combat zone or retained in CONUS. Since staff and leader training are just as vital, *all* new soldiers (including officers) should make their way to this unit first. This procedure would eliminate many of the transition problems encountered by inexperienced personnel entering combat for the first time. With a standing TO&E, cadre, and necessary equipment, such a formation would no longer have to be created in time of war. This organization has obvious peacetime utility as well.

The second suggestion involves unit-level training for those forces already at war. In peacetime, the Army uses the Battle Command Training Program (BCTP) to simulate combat conditions for division and corps staffs. While this organization deployed on an *ad hoc* basis for Operations Desert Shield/Storm, this is not a usual phenomenon. A solution to the problem of training these units at war might be the creation of a standing BCTP team in the same manner that some Commanders-in-Chief have formed standing Joint Task Force (JTF) headquarters for contingencies within their theaters. Likewise, the creation of a standing, deployable Combat Training Center (CTC) cadre would facilitate the training of smaller units (brigade and below) during wartime. The use of these measures again eliminates the necessity to alter the entire Army school system and ensures that the combat experience feedback loop reacts more rapidly to the conflict environment.

In effect, these modifications to training insert a new tier in the Army's training base similar to the division of responsibility found between the German Field Army/Replacement Army system of World War II. Information will, eventually, filter back to the training base so that those soldierly *fundamentals* that require modification are

changed. More relevant and theater-specific lessons, on the other hand, are inserted rapidly where they are needed most, *via* organizations whose peacetime mission is to prepare for this instructional task during war.

While there is a significant resource cost associated with these suggestions, they offer definite advantages under those conditions where rapid reform is necessary, and even hold out the possibility of facilitating innovation. One of Professor Rosen's hypotheses is that an organization featuring decentralized execution can innovate more rapidly during wartime. With a decentralized combat-experience feedback loop, units on the firing line may be more able to execute the requisite innovation without the necessity of forcing these innovations on the Army as a whole, especially when this may not be required or appropriate, as in the case of Vietnam. Professor Rosen states his argument as follows:

Decentralization would seem to favor innovation in those circumstances in which the operating units can collect all the relevant data themselves and can execute the innovation without the need for organizational changes elsewhere in their service.¹³⁹

By increasing the ability of units in combat to internalize lessons learned and then to train themselves, this goal is facilitated.

In conclusion, it seems difficult to disagree with Fuller's quote from the beginning of this chapter. Only in rare instances has the start of a war not led to the requirement for reform or innovation in a service's training. To believe otherwise and stake the institution's combat future completely on its peacetime training is a risky proposition at best. In the final analysis, perhaps Michael Howard's perspective on this issue is closest to the mark. It is not so much that victory will go to the side whose training is most

suited for the ensuing conflict, since in all likelihood it will only be better by a matter of degree. Rather, it is the ability of one side or the other to “get it right quickly when the moment arrives” that will be the decisive element in training while at war. The key to this ability, however, is to prepare the learning and teaching organs *before* the shooting starts, since to wait to do so while under fire may be too late.

ENDNOTES

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²⁵ Larry H. Addington, The Blitzkrieg Era and the German General Staff, 1865-1941 (Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 39-40.

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